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ABSTRACT

During the last 30 years, direct mail campaigning has become an integral part of the political process, and more recently has also become an influential fund raising tool for other political and religious groups. Analysis of over 70 examples of direct mail campaigns reveals at least 4 major content norms featured in most direct mail. First, the letters typically begin by attempting to motivate people to read them, usually with a startling, dramatic opening statement, or by headlining an important or recognizable name. The second feature is the early introduction of an enemy, either a specific individual or a more abstract group, such as the liberal press or homosexuals. The third is an attempt to assure the reader of the credibility of the organization sponsoring the letter so that the reader will be certain that his or her support will be effective, usually by casting the present situation in desperate straits. The final content norm is the closing appeal for financial assistance. Nearly every piece of direct mail examined casts the sponsoring organization as a defender of some traditional value. Thus a motivation analysis is of critical importance in understanding the basic function of political direct mail. It uses motivation rather than persuasion; it seeks to galvanize the believers rather than convert the heathen. This form of discourse can be viewed as a rhetorical genre, possessing both normative characteristics and core motives that apply regardless of the source of the discourse. (HTH)

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POLITICAL DIRECT MAIL: THE STATE OF THE ART

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One can potentially trace the impact of mail upon American politics back to the pre-Revolutionary "Committees of Correspondence." It is, however, only in the last 30 years that the use of the mails has become an integral part of the election campaign process. [1] At present, candidates for major elective office use the mails directly in order to supplement Federal financing of elections. Admittedly, this Federal financing has somewhat diminished the importance of direct mail to individual candidates. The same Federal campaign reform laws which created Federal financing, however, have also led to the rise of Political Action Committees. These committees raise funds on behalf of individual candidates and spend their gains to further his or her campaign. Their efforts have been highly successful. In the past seven years, more than 1 billion pieces of direct mail have been sent out by conservative candidates and causes. Direct mail was used to secure 90% of the operating budget of groups like Citizens for the Republic, (affiliated with Ronald Reagan) and 90% of the $40 million spent by the Republican National Committee in 1980.[2]

Direct mail has also become necessary to the existence and influence of groups such as the National Conservative Union, Young Americans for Freedom, and the Moral Majority. These groups are active not only during political elections, but function as lobby groups supporting their favorite causes as well. Their use of computerized mailing lists and computer generated letters has served to identify and organize their supporters as well as to solicit funds.[3] As the above list indicates, political direct mail has been traditionally associated with conservative candidates and conservative issues. In recent years, however, particularly since the election of 1980, liberal-oriented groups such as the National Coalition to Ban Handguns, the Wildlife Federation, and Klanwatch have

made extensive use of the mail. It is no exaggeration to suggest that the 1984 Democratic primary campaign is already underway—through the mail.

It seems appropriate to view political direct mail as a distinct rhetorical genre. Harrell and Linkugel assert that "rhetorical genres stem from organizing principles found in recurring situations that generate discourse characterized by a family of common factors."[4] (original emphasis) They suggest further that discourse should be examined motivationally, using Fisher's typology of affirmation, reaffirmation, purification, and subversion.[5] The basic operations of generic research are described by Harrell and Linkugel as description, participation, and application.[6] This essay will attempt to explore the state of the art of political direct mail by focusing in-depth on the first operation in the Harrell and Linkugel model: description.

Generic description, according to Harrell and Linkugel, involves two things: "identification of motivational precedents of the genre,"[6] or the "interaction between the rhetor and situational factors,"[7] and "mapping of the characteristic (i.e. normative) factors within the genre" resulting from a "study of representative examples of rhetorical artifacts." This process should produce "a set of contitutive and operational definitions which can guide the work of other researchers wishing to work within the same genre."[8] This process of generic description of political direct mail shall begin by discussing the normative factors found within the genre.

Mapping Normative Factors of Political Direct Mail

Analysis of over 70 examples of post-1980 direct mail reveals at

least four major content norms featured in most direct mail. First, the letters typically began by attempting to motivate people to actually read them. Most often this was done with a startling, dramatic statement, such as "We are so close to victory! So close,"[9] or "I want you to be the first to know about a most ambitious project now in the final planning stages."[10] Other examples encountered were:

> My name is General Daniel O. Graham. Although I have never written to you before, I pray you will read my letter very carefully. I am convinced the future security of you, your family and the entire nation may depend on how you respond to it. 11

"You may be in for a big surprise ... a disastrous surprise."[12] "Is our environment about to go up in smoke?"[13] "On August 5, 1981, President Reagan made a decision to produce the most fearsome and anti-human weapon in the history of the world."[14]

Another common technique discovered to accomplish the goal of piquing the interest of the audience was the use of a vivid, startling statement as a headline over the text of the letter. "Start the new year out right, cast your vote to CLEAN UP AMERICA."[15] "Bible Creation Evolution?"[16] "Defenders Sue James Watt!"[17] were typical of the headlines used in this manner.

Finally, it was not unusual to find the text of a letter headlined by an "important" or at least recognizable name. Glenn Ford, Congressman Claude Pepper, Kurt Vonnegut, Archibald Cox, Paul Moore Jr., Rev. Robert McAfee Brown, Cecil Andrus, The Vice President, and Leon Uris were some of those who lent their names to various direct mail enterprises.

A second content norm of political direct mail was the early introduction of an enemy. Ruth Hinerfeld of the League of Women Voters exemplified

norm in a ltter received March 18, 1982:

> Shortly before I mailed this letter to you, the Attorney General of the United States, William French Smith, presented the Administration testimony on the voting rights acts before the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee chaired by Senator Hatch. I was there that day to give the League's views. Smith confirmed our fears: he called for a number of amendments that we believe will gut the act. His testimony was warmly received by Senator Hatch. The fight is definitely on! 18

Jerry Falwell of the Moral Majority:

> Certain members of a liberal press are attempting to weaken and cripple the Moral Majority. One subtle way they are attempting to do this is through a series of political cartoons -- attacking the Moral Majority and me personally. You may have possibly seen similar cartoons in your local newspaper. . . . 19

Anthony Podesta of People For The American Way:

> You will see from the illustrations in the letter that the rise of censorship and the efforts by the Radical Right to take control of local schools is moving very rapidly -- and unfortunately succeeding in many states and towns. 20

Russell D. Hemenway of the National Committee for an Effective Congress:

> In reviewing the record of the current Congress, many concerned Americans are tempted to throw up their hands in despair. After all, a coalition of New Right Republicans and conservative Democrats has already managed to slash essential funds for child nutrition programs, destroy the job opportunities for unemployed urban teenagers, restrict family planning counseling, virtually eliminate support for the arts, humanities, and scientific research. 21

Very clearly, then, contemporary political direct mail attempts to draw readers into combat against a specific enemy. Sometimes this enemy is readily apparent, such as James Watt or Normal Lear, but most often the enemy, while clearly identified, is presented in more abstract terms: The New Right, Militant Homosexuals, the News Media, and the like.

The third content norm discovered in contemporary political direct mail is an attempt to assure the reader of the credibility of the organization sponsoring the letter. In this way the reader is certain that his or her support will not be meaningless or ineffective. Rather, the reader is led to believe that victory is certain if sufficient support is provided. A Jerry Falwell letter dated February 1, 1982 gloated that "It is possible that the E.R.A. could be buried forever in the next few weeks."[22] The National Peace Academy Campaign assurred readers "for the first time in history we have within our grasp an alternative method of resolving human conflict --an alternative to force and violence."[23] Ruth Hinerfeld promised:

> Your contribution will make it possible for us to mobilize an effective coalition to stop the Hatch and Thurmond plans by letting wavering Senators and Representatives know that millions of concerned Americans -- not only minorities -- will be watching them. 24

As part of this effort to mobilize support, political direct mail typically casts the present situation as being in rather desperate straits. Notices that this is a crucial hour or a critical moment are typically woven into the message, adding an air of urgency to the entire undertaking. Readers are left with the impression that their support is needed NOW in order to forstall disaster. A letter by Jerry Falwell provides an excellent example. Over four pages of text are sprinkled phrases such as "I desperately need you to stand beside me," "we desperately need your support," "we haven't a moment to lose!" "it is so important that I hear from you right away," "I desperately need a generous gift from you."[25]

The final content norm discovered should be apparent from the previous example. All of the letters examined ended with an appeal for financial assistance. Typically this appeal includes a "suggested gift,"

usually $25, and a form to be filled out by the donor. Sometimes the appeal for money is tied to membership in the organization sponsoring the letter, but often they are special appeals designed to "set the record straight" or sponsor a special program or effort of the organization.

There was one other content factor wi h may be on the way to becoming normative. Much of the 1982 direct mail contained some attention-getting device on the envelope itself. This seemed to be an effort to motivate the reader to actually open the envelope instead of discarding it as "junk mail." The envelope was often adorned with the logo or official seal of the organization. Some envelopes were made up to look like telegrams. Others were marked "priority message"[26] or "immediate reply requested."[27] Sometimes questions were used to hint at the content of the enclosed letter. "Where have all the children gone?"[28] and "What is the Last Socially Accepted form of Bigotry?"[29] are examp les of this technique.

In addition to the content norms mentioned previously, it is apparent that several norms affecting the form of the letters exist. Most letters received were 7½ x 10" rather than the standard 8½ x 11"format. In addition, the actual content of the letter is often spaced in a manner to draw the readers attention to the main points of the appeal. These main points are often underlined or circled, giving the impression that the author did so personally. Of course, frequent variations in type-face are found in most of the letters, and many groups try to make their letters as visually attractive as possible by using multi-colored paper, reprints of official logos or national symbols, and the like.

The Motivational Bases of Political Direct Mail

With these fundamental normative characteristics established, one can

complete the generic description of political direct mail by examining the motivational bases of the discourse. From previous analysis of the enemy and the struggle it seems clear that contemporary political direct mail is rooted in the core motives of purification and subversion, with emphasis on the former. Harrell and Linkugel suggest that "purification implies a previously established image or ideology has somehow become tarnished through attack or through some sort of redefinition."[30] Interestingly, nearly every piece of direct mail examined in this essay cast the sponsoring organization as a defender of some traditional value. Amnesty International posed as the defender of "human rights."[31] People for the American Way asked readers to "send a clear signal that people who stand up for tolerance, diversity, and free speech are not alone."[32] The Moral Majority defends the "right of the unborn to live,. . . the essential value of the family. . . and . . . the importance of teaching children and young people traditional American values."[33]

This motivational analysis is of critical importance in understanding the basic function of political direct mail. It is motivation rather than persuasion. It seeks to galvanize the believers rather than convert the heathen. This helps explain the "us versus them" tone of most of the letters.

This right versus wrong perspective leads naturally to the idea of subversion. A basic function of the letters is to attack or tarnish the opposing ideology, precisely the role of subversive motivation according to Harrell and Linkugel.[34] The enemy is invariably depicted as being ruthless, cruel, and unfair. Typically, the enemy is also described as being extremely powerful and extremely dangerous.

This review of contemporary political direct mail is now complete. It seems clear that this form of discourse can be viewed as a rhetorical genre. It seems to possess both normative characteristics and core motives which apply regardless of the source of the discourse. Future research should be able to discover standards for evaluating direct mail efforts as well as more refined species of the political direct mail genre.

[1]Craig W. Cutbirth and Mark Schmidt, "Direct Mail as a Rhetorical Tool: The Conservative Campaign of 1980." Unpublished Paper presented to the SCA national convention, Anaheim, California, November 13, 1982.

[2]Richard A. Viguerie, "Conservatives Owe Much to Reagan, Direct Mail," Conservative Digest, November, 1980, p. 39.

[3]Herbert E. Alexamder, Financing Politics. (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1980), p. 120

[4]Jackson Harrell and Wil A. Linkugel, "On Rhetorical Genre: An Organizing Perspective." in Bernard Brock and Robert L. Scott, editors, Methods of Rhetorical Criticism: A Twentieth-Century Perspective. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1980), p. 406.

[5]Harrell and Linkugel, p. 413.

[6]Harrell and Linkugel, p. 415.

[7]Harrell and Linkugel, p. 410.

[8]Harrell and Linkugel, p. 415.

[9]Jerry Falwell. letter received January 7, 1982.

[10]Anthoney Podesta, People for the American Way. letter received January, 1982.

[11]Lieutenant General Daniel O. Graham, United States Defense Committee, letter received April, 1982.

[12]Robin C. Duke, National Abortion Rights League, letter received April, 1982,

[13]Janet Welsh Brown, Environmental Defense Fund, undated.

[14]Dr. Benjamin Spock, Narional Mobilization for Survival, letter received April, 1982.

[15]Jerry Falwell, Moral Majority, letter received January 2, 1982.

[16]Jerry Falwell, Moral Majority, letter received June, 1981.

[17]Toby Cooper, Defenders of Wildlife, , undated.

[18]Ruth Hinerfeld, League of Women Voters, letter received March, 1982.

[19]Jerry Falwell, Moral Majority, letter received November, 1982.

[20]Anthony Podesta, People for the American Way, letter received March 27, 1982.

[21]Russell D. Hemenway, National Committee for an Effective Congress, letter received March, 1982.

[22]Jerry Falwell, Moral Majority, letter dated February 1, 1982.

[23]Milton C. Mapes, Jr., National Peace Academy Campaign, undated.

[24]Ruth Hinerfeld, League of Women Voters, undated.

[25]Jerry Falwell, Moral Majority, letter received July, 1981.

[26]Ruth Hinerfeld, League of Women Voters, undated.

[27]Guy Vander Jagt, Republican Congressional Campaign Committee, undated.

[28]Vincent McGee, Amnesty International, undated.

[29]Midge Costanza, National Gay Rights Organization, letter received March, 1982.

[30]Harrell and Linkugel, p. 414.

[31]Vincent McGee, Amnesty International, undated.

[32]Anthony Podesta, People for the American Way, letter received March, 1982.

[33]Jerry Falwell, Moral Majority, letter dated February 15, 1982.